



work.
in tune
with life.
move europe

A guide for employees to promote mental health in the workplace



ENWHP

Mental Health Foundation



Healthy
Working
Lives

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Edinburgh office:
Woodburn House
Canaan Lane
Edinburgh EH10 4SG

Glasgow office:
Elphinstone House
65 West Regent Street
Glasgow G2 2AF

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Mental health is important to everyone in the workplace

As an employee, you have the right to expect your employer and managers to create the conditions for mentally healthy workplaces. But you also have responsibilities to promote your own mental health, and to take care of yourself and your colleagues. The European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP) is working with organisations across Europe to develop a mental health promotion campaign in workplaces called **'Work. In tune with life.'**

This campaign aims to:

- » promote positive mental health in the workplace
- » understand and prevent issues that cause stress and mental health problems
- » support employees who develop mental health problems
- » develop effective policies to reintegrate and employ people who have experienced mental health problems.

Mental health

The World Health Organization defines positive mental health as 'a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. Employees with good mental health will perform better in their work.' So it is about the way you think, feel and behave. Many people don't feel comfortable talking about their feelings, but it is healthy to understand, share and respond to how you're feeling. And you can take steps to promote positive mental health and to reduce stress.

Mental health problems

The term, 'mental health problem' covers a wide range of issues which affect someone's ability to get on with their daily life. Mental health problems can affect anyone, of any age and background, as well as having an impact on the people around them, such as their family, friends and carers. Most people can and do recover. On average 1 in 4 people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of their lifetime. However, of these, only a relatively small number will be diagnosed with a serious and enduring mental health problem. Common mental health problems usually consist of experiences such as depression and anxiety. With support, most people recover from their mental health problems, so it is important to overcome the stigma associated with mental health problems in the workplace.

So what can you do to promote your mental health and create a supportive workplace?

Talk about your feelings

Talking about your feelings can help you to stay in good mental health. It can also help you to cope when you are feeling worried. Speaking to colleagues about your feelings, or sharing a problem, is not a weakness. It is part of maintaining positive mental health and taking control of your wellbeing. Being heard can make you feel supported and less isolated. This does not need to be a formal process but part of everyday conversations. Sharing your feelings may encourage colleagues to do the same. It is important to make the time to listen to others, to be supportive and respectful.

Support social networks

Having supportive friends, family and community networks helps us to deal with life and reduce our sense of isolation. They provide emotional support, fun and alternative perspectives. Social networks promote positive mental health and help to prevent mental health problems. Yet we often forget that we spend a large part of our lives with our 'workplace community'. So, wherever possible, 'make connections' in the workplace. This can be informal, such as having breaks and lunches together. You can also help to create a positive workplace by organising or participating in social groups or activities. Be creative and think of activities that everyone can join in. There will be additional benefits if the activities involve physical activity, or learning a new skill or hobby.

Zero tolerance

Significant workplace distress is linked to bullying or misuse of power. Bullying can be overt, such as physical or verbal aggression or intimidation. It can also be subtle, such as making fun of people, excluding people from opportunities or promotion unreasonably, or undermining them. Anyone can bully or be bullied and it can be a difficult issue to establish. However, employees that are particularly vulnerable are those who may experience disadvantage due to gender, low income or poverty, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and employees experiencing mental health problems. In workplaces, employees who have temporary contracts or low job security are also vulnerable. As an employee you can ensure that you do not go along with bullying in any form. Support rather than ignore people if they have been bullied and work with colleagues to ensure that bullying policies are established and upheld.

Physical health and wellbeing

Improving your physical health can promote positive mental health. The first thing you can do is 'keep active' at work. Regular daily exercise can boost your confidence and self-esteem, help you to sleep and function better. Why not get together with colleagues to join a gym or sports or activity group? You can also consider walking at lunchtime, and small steps such as taking the stairs rather than the lift. There are also links between diet and mental health. Missing meals at work, eating on the run, and relying on sugary snacks or high-caffeine drinks can create stress. So try to ensure that you eat a balanced diet at work. Don't miss breaks. Take adequate time off and try to relax. Drink sensibly. We often drink alcohol to change our mood or to deal with fear or loneliness. However, too much alcohol damages the body and leads to mental health problems.

Managing stress

It is important to **'Work. In tune with life.'** and that means controlling stress at work. Stress is:

'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them.'

Stress is not an illness but if it becomes excessive and/or prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop. Work is generally good for people if it is well designed, but it can also be a great source of pressure. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor; it can help us achieve our goals and perform better. Stress is a natural reaction when this pressure becomes excessive. Anyone can suffer from work-related stress, no matter what work they do.

Are you stressed?

Stress produces a range of signs and symptoms. The following is not an exhaustive list of the symptoms of stress but if you feel that your attitudes or behaviour is changing due a situation at work or home, these may indicate stress and a need to seek further advice from your GP:

<p>Behaviourally, you may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» find it hard to sleep» change your eating habits» smoke or drink more» avoid friends and family» have sexual problems.	<p>Physical symptoms might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» tiredness» indigestion and nausea» headaches» aching muscles» palpitations.
<p>Mentally, you may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» be more indecisive» find it hard to concentrate» suffer loss of memory» experience feelings of inadequacy» experience low self-esteem.	<p>Emotionally, you are likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» get irritable or angry» be anxious» feel numb» be hypersensitive, drained and listless.

If you think you are suffering from any mental health problem or any of the symptoms identified in the table above, it may be advisable to speak to a doctor or GP. It is also a good idea to talk to your line manager, human resources department or occupational health provider. It is important to deal with mental health problems early and to take action. Review your lifestyle to see if you can identify any contributing factors. This may be due to workload issues such as doing several jobs at once, or taking work home with you. However, check the positive mental health section of the HSE website for ideas that you can act upon.

www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mystress.htm

Source: Health and Safety Executive UK

Supporting colleagues with mental health problems

Even when you take steps to promote positive mental health and to manage stress, some people will still go on to develop mental health problems. Mental health problems are common and can be experienced by anyone. For example, every year, 10% of people in the workforce will experience depression. There are different forms of depression and it is different from feeling down or sad. The person may experience persistent feelings of tiredness, negativity, anxiety, helplessness, worthlessness, and difficulty concentrating or functioning well at work. Sometimes there is a direct cause for a mental health problem, such as a life event, relationship issues, worries about finances or unemployment. A cause can also be problems within the workplace, like too high a workload, a shortage of support or a conflict with colleagues or a manager. Sometimes there is no clear reason. However, with support, most people recover.

Seek support early

If you or a colleague are experiencing mental distress then seek help from health services or your employer early. Problems with workload, support, or relationships with colleagues can worsen mental health and your employer has a duty to intervene. They may be able to review your work commitments or specific issues, but they can only do this if you let them know.

Be there for your colleagues

You can be a supportive colleague by listening to someone if they are experiencing a mental health problem. It is particularly important to ensure that when someone is experiencing a mental health problem, they are given every opportunity to participate and remain involved in everyday social activities. Keep in touch with people if they have a period of absence.

Become informed

There are a range of courses and workshops about mental health that can help you. To learn more, visit www.healthyworkinglives.com

There are also a wide range of other websites that offer help:

Breathing Space
www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk or
0800 838587

Samaritans
www.samaritans.org or **08457 90 90 90**

The Scottish Government's new positive mental health campaign
www.stepsforstress.org

Scotland's national campaign to end the stigma and discrimination of mental ill health
www.seemescotland.org

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Colophon

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